



# A Glimpse at Language Learner Literature and Extensive Reading

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As a foreign language university, it is our responsibility to introduce students to various approaches to language learning that they can use to build their language skills. It is also our responsibility to promote learner independence because developing foreign language proficiency is a lifelong practice, not something finished within the span of a four-year degree. In order for students to achieve their greatest potential, they have to take their learning outside of the classroom and ultimately, beyond the boundaries of university life.

One learner-centered language learning approach that researchers praise and students often enjoy is extensive reading (ER). ER is an approach to language learning that puts learners at the center by giving them control over what books they read; they can choose their reading level and then the books to read on topics that reflect their own interests. The books they read are usually graded readers, which are texts that have been written or adapted specifically for language learners and are graded in areas such as number of words, vocabulary and grammar complexity. Alongside these considerations, quality graded readers also carefully attend to things such as relevance of content and control of information. Attention to these broader aspects and the importance of good story telling are generally attributed to John Milne, creator of the Heinemann Guided Readers series in the 1970s. For more information on how different publishers have dealt with reducing the complexity in stories, we suggest reading Simensen (1987).

The aim of ER is for students to read a lot at the optimum level for comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), a level where learners can easily understand a text despite not knowing the meaning of every word in it. Students read extensively at their ability level or below, and through this abundant, relaxed and easy reading, they develop both reading speed and fluency. Key principles of ER include the following.

- 1) Quantity of text read (Learners should read a lot.)
- 2) The match of text level to the student's ability (The material read should be easy for individual learners, which means there are few unfamiliar words, so they can read a lot, and they can read fast. Waring (2000) suggests around 150 words per minute before advancing to a higher level.)
- 3) Learner choice (Students make decisions based on their own ability and interests, and this promotes motivation (Pink, 2009), and the continuation of reading.)

Although ER is a reading-based activity, it is considered a language learning approach because the benefits of ER extend well beyond building reading skills. For example, research reports that ER can also help build vocabulary and grammar knowledge and can increase student enjoyment in learning (Nation, 2001). As learners read more they meet more words, and they meet words repeatedly. This exposure to vocabulary allows them to naturally increase their vocabulary, and importantly, it affords a depth of word knowledge that discrete studying of vocabulary does not typically allow. Seeing words working together with their collocations helps learners learn more about words than only their meaning and expands learners' ability to use the words they know. The benefits of natural exposure to words in action is also true for grammar.

Through ER, learners meet different grammar patterns again and again, and they can begin to internalize grammar rules and are then able to produce them more accurately.

In addition to these linguistic gains, there are affective gains to be had as well. As learners read more, their understanding grows, and as that happens, their confidence tends to increase (Cho and Krashen, 1994), and confident learners are often able to find greater motivation for learning and become more effective learners (Pink, 2009). Ideally, through ER, learners will find what Trelease (2001) refers to as a “home run book”, a story which significantly stimulates learners’ interest in reading and thus motivates them to read more and more.

For many years, ER has been garnering praise as a wholistic approach to language learning, and the number of graded readers now available to learners is substantial. Because navigating the offerings can be overwhelming and might deter some from exploring this opportunity for their students, here we share some recommendations based on our experience with graded readers. We will give basic information on two publishers we highly respect: Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press.

As we introduce the reader options from these two publishers, we will refer to different levels in which the books are available. There is no standard leveling system across publishers; however, the publishers use headword counts to indicate the vocabulary burden of each of their levels. Headwords are words that warrant a separate entry in the dictionary. The Extensive Reading Foundation, an unrivaled ER resource, has compiled headword counts from various publishers and made a graded reader scale. It is important to note however that the scale and headword counts are not based on frequency wordlists. Nevertheless, they are helpful. For reference, research reports native speakers of English generally have a working knowledge of about 15–20 thousand headwords.

### **Cambridge University Press: Cambridge English Readers, Cambridge Experience Readers, Cambridge Discovery Education Interactive Readers**

Cambridge University Press has been one of the leaders among publishers in English language teaching materials for decades. They made their first contribution to the ER literature in the 1990’s and currently have over 200 books spread among several different series, with many texts being original stories written specifically for language learners. Each series has levels that are correlated to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) pre-A1 through C1 (however there is a limited selection of C1 options), as well as using other methods such as headword count and Lexile measure. A1 books have approximately 400 headwords, B1s have 1300 and C1s have 3800. Three series will be introduced here, and all of them have free audio options and teacher resources available online.

Cambridge English Readers are original fiction written expressly for English language learners. Uniquely, this six-level series does not include any story or film adaptations. A benefit of not using stories presented in films is that initially reluctant readers cannot rely solely on watching the film instead of reading the book. The series contains a wide variety of themes from romance to mystery, like the award-winning *Man Hunt*. Among the Cambridge reader libraries, this series has the greatest number of higher-level, C1, reader options. Book length ranges from 2500 words at the beginner level to about 30,000 at Level 6, the highest level.

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Cambridge Experience Readers are fiction and factbooks written for teenagers. Their emphasis is on the beginning to low intermediate range, and they have headword counts from 400 to 1900. Engaging topics and bold pictures help to support young learners as they build their English skills, and although they are written for teenagers, our students continue to find them appealing. Among the Experience Readers, there are exciting subseries that allow learners to get to know characters and become interested in learning more about their adventures. For example, in the series *Little Trouble in...* a set of twins takes readers on exciting journeys to California, Amsterdam, Dublin and the Yorkshire Dales. This series begins with slightly shorter book lengths than the Cambridge English Readers, but Level 6 is about the same at 27,000.

Cambridge Discovery Education Interactive Readers are innovative non-fiction readers that are available as printed books or online, with books that cover beginner to upper intermediate levels. Each reader can be accessed through Cambridge Learner Management System and has options such as captivating video and interactive exercises. Learners can enjoy reading about topics that span science, geography and history, as well as sports and the natural world. Some of the more appealing titles are *Sushi Nation* and *Weird Weapons*. As with the other Cambridge readers, all titles have recordings available on the Cambridge website. The length of these books begins significantly shorter than the others with some texts having as few as 1300 words; however, the highest level in this series is also in the 30,000 range.

### **Oxford University Press: Classic Tales, Oxford Read and Discover, Dominoes, Oxford Bookworms Library, Oxford Bookworms FactFiles**

With so many publishers contributing worthwhile language learner literature these days, it was difficult to decide which two publishers to include in this glimpse at graded readers. However, Oxford University Press has such an outstanding track record with both educators and learners, it would have been unfair to not include them. Oxford University Press has many English readers within a variety of series and not all will be introduced here. The majority of their graded readers target readers at the beginning to intermediate levels, and like Cambridge readers, their levels are correlated to the CEFR.

Classic Tales is a series aimed at young learners age six and up and consists of five levels, with Level 1 stories averaging 540 words and Level 5 averaging 2,675 words. Many university-age students still enjoy reading these tales and can make their reading experiences more beneficial by reading the stories aloud to their younger siblings or students that they teach at cram schools or through tutoring. The series is available as printed books and also as eBooks with audio. In addition to including popular stories like *Beauty and the Beast*, the series provides learners with exposure to less familiar classics, such as *The Heron* and *the Hummingbird*.

Oxford Read and Discover series has books designed to support Content and Language Integrated Learning and covers three different curricular areas: science and technology, arts and social studies, and the natural world. Activities at the end of each book allow for interesting projects to develop from the text if teachers or learners choose to make use of them. This series is ideal for learners who are particularly interested in nonfiction reading. The average word count for Level 1 is 700 words and Level 6 is 3,750. In addition to the print versions, this series is available as eBooks.

Dominoes series are graded readers with five levels (Quick Starter to Level 3). They are printed in full color and provide accessible definitions for challenging intext words that are essential to a reading. This support is given for all words in bold text. The Quick Starter stories average 1121 words in length. Level 3 stories average a somewhat enormous 13,000. Dominoes stories include optional pre-reading, while-reading, and after-reading activities, as well as multiple pages of grammar activities. The Dominoes audio packs include books with downloadable MP3 files, and some of the titles in this series are available as eBooks.

Oxford Bookworms Library consists of seven levels (Starter to Level 6) and over 200 titles. These include both adapted texts and original stories. Some of the stories in the Starter Level are interactive readers, with the books not designed to be read straight through; the text asks readers to choose the next development in the story and then move to the page that corresponds to it. As a result, the books differ in length and outcome depending on the choices readers make while reading them. Popular nonfiction stories that our students find compelling are *The Elephant Man*, *The Love of a King* and *The Death of Karen Silkwood*, all of which are based on true stories and touch on human drama, romance and mystery respectfully. As for fiction, students always praise *The Piano* and a collection of short stories called *Cries from the Heart* that deal with some extreme challenges that life can present us. FactFiles is a subseries in the Oxford Bookworms Library which is excellent for learners who like non-fiction and biographies. It includes titles on contemporary heroes such as Malala Yousafzai and Usain Bolt and award-winning titles, such as *The Everest Story* and *The Life and Diaries of Anne Frank*. The Bookworms series is available in paper with or without MP3 audio.

Both Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press provide excellent readers that can meet the ability level and interests of a wider variety of learners. Additionally, on their websites they both offer good support for teachers and students by providing a considerable amount of free audio and video options and teaching materials. Each publisher has put together guides to support teachers with understanding what ER is and why it is a valuable approach to language learning. Oxford University Press has a wonderful nineteen-page booklet called, *The 'Why' and 'How' of Using Graded Readers* that is available free to members of their Teacher's Club. This resource is available in both English and Japanese through the Oxford University Press website. Cambridge has a useful pdf guide titled *Extensive Reading in ELT: Why and How* which is free and easy to find online by searching the title. In addition to these publisher-based resources, we also recommend exploring the websites for the Extensive Reading Foundation and MReader. These sites provide a wealth of information about this wonderful approach and how you can use ER to enhance your students English learning opportunities.

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